Presbyterian Writers Guild
7/5/12 Pittsburgh
John Buchanan

This comes as a total but wonderful surprise. In fact, when Barrie Shepherd called to tell me about it I thought he must have made a mistake and really only meant to complain about something in the magazine—which he never does, but plenty of people do. The fact is I don't see myself as a writer at all, but rather much more a reader who is regularly, deeply grateful that there are people who write.

In fact, writers are my favorite celebrities next to baseball players. I read and admired Barrie Shepherd's poems and quoted them in sermons years before I met him. The same is true for Ann Weems, and of course Fred Buechner - who has been over the years one of the truly formative writers and thinkers and preachers for me.

I quoted Buechner so much while I was writing sermons that someone in the Chicago congregation purchased one of

his books and was disappointed because I had already used most of the best material.

So I am honored beyond words by this award. It is particularly meaningful because it is the David Steele Award. I had long read and admired David's editorializing before I met him as well. One of the items in my "Keeper File" is a brief note and attached article he wrote for the Outlook which he sent to me in January 1996, not long after I declared myself a candidate for Moderator of the General Assembly.

David's close friend, Norm Pott, was also a candidate. David wrote, "I know you are doing lots of meditation on the art of the possible! Shalom. David Steele." The article he wrote and enclosed was on the looming ordination decision. After the three years of study and discussion and discernment that the whole church engaged in, David observed that the only consensus we reached is that we do not and cannot agree with one another.

David hoped that Gamaliel might show up at the G.A. meeting in Albuquerque and that somehow we might come through, like the early church - “free to get on with the work of Christ and free to disagree with each other.” I got to know David after the Assembly, in fact we had a pleasant dinner with David at Norm Pott’s home, and he is one of my saints.

Writers have always been conduits of meaning and truth and inspiration to me, as well as entertainment. John Updike was and remains one of my favorites, an all-star up there with Roberto Clemente. I bumped into Updike one time on Michigan Ave. right in front of Fourth Presbyterian Church when he was speaking at the Chicago Humanities Festival. Updike knew a lot of theology, cited Barth and Kierkegaard and Calvin and was something of a church person. So I screwed up my courage and introduced myself. “Mr. Updike, I’m an admirer of your writing. I’m the pastor of this church.“ He looked at the church, looked at me: said: “That’s nice,” and walked away.

Reading and then quoting Updike is risky business. A few weeks before I retired, at a Guy's Night Out with sons, a few friends and the male staff of FC after a Bears game and steak dinner at Gibson's on Rush Street, there was a roast. My colleague, Adam Fronczek, mentioned how much I quoted my literary hero, John Updike and then wondered about the wisdom, not to mention appropriateness, of my choice of writer to cite in sermons. Adam then regaled us by reading, in a solemn homiletical style the absolutely raciest most erotic passage of Updike he could find. Something like, "She crouched on the bed, crawling toward him on her hands and knees, like a hungry she-wolf." (I think Adam actually enjoyed his research, a lot.)

I had been in trouble before because of Updike. In Columbus, Ohio, the wife of my sons' high school basketball coach was the president of a faculty wives' book club, and hearing that I read Updike and quoted him decided that an Updike novel would be just the thing for the club's next reading. Unfortunately, the book she chose was *Couples,* introducing the book saying the minister of Broad Street

Presbyterian church had recommended it. I never lived it down.

I love my work at the *Christian Century*, first of all because I don't have to work very hard. Journalists are introverts, come to work, go into their office, close the door and write. The task of supervising journalists begin and ends, with seeing if they show up, saying "Good morning" and leaving them alone. I OK invoices, sign checks, keep an eye on the bottom line and get to hang out with some great writers: Marcus Borg and Walter Brueggemann, Kathleen Norris, Martin Marty, Lillian Daniel, Miroslav Volf, William Willimon, Barbara Brown Taylor, N.T. Wright. It's the literary/theological equivalent of going to work everyday at the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown.

The magazine is holding its own in a very dicey climate for all print journalism.

The down side is that I have to write, an editorial, every other week, a short editorial, I am accustomed to the literary leisure of a twenty-twenty-five minute sermon. There are

space limits in the magazine. If I go too long I infringe on lucrative advertising space, so I never do and if I do Debra Bendis or David Heim edits me, something that never happens to the preacher, but which, I now conclude–-should.

Roger Rosenblatt, in the back page essay in the *New York Times Books Review*, May 13, “The Writer in the Family,” lamented that one of the burdens of being a writer is that very few people know what it is you do (not unlike the clergy… And what exactly do you do, Reverend, except preach once a week?”) Rosenblatt lives with a daughter and son-in-law. His 4th grade granddaughter Jessice took him to “show and tell.” “This is my grandfather, Boppo — he lives in the basement and does nothing.” Rosenblatt wrote: “Someone asked me recently ‘You still working?’ as if the profession was a new sport I picked up, like curling, or a disease I was trying to get rid of.”

Those of us who read a lot; those of us who write, books, essays, editorials, poetry … those of us who once a week prepare a sermon for God’s people (and I always wrote

mine, every word), know how hard it is to do well, how hard to convey truth, conviction, beauty, sacrifice, hope — but also on occasion how incredibly powerful.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The preacher knows, the writer knows, I hope, that somehow sometimes our words become the vehicle of the Word, sometimes in spite of us the Word becomes flesh in our words.

Our words become a means of grace. Words written with discipline and commitment, with skill and integrity and passion, become words of grace, bearers of beauty and truth.

I remember the first time it happened. It was in a college American Literature class.

I was a sophomore. We were reading *The Grapes of Wrath*. Professor Stoneseifer was lecturing on the big themes

that underlie that novel, and how Steinbeck and other writers – Hemingway, Faulkner, and Marilynne Robinson, for instance - used Biblical phrases and symbols.

Near the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, when things are desperate and people are literally dying of hunger, a pregnant girl's baby is stillborn. An elderly man, emaciated, is dying of hunger.

The girl's mother tells her to offer the man her breast, which she does.

Many of the sophomores – it was an all male school at that time – chuckled – "gross! disgusting!"

Stoneseifer got to me, opened a new window – when he simply observed that the scene could be perceived as sacred – a reminder of powerful Christian motifs – mother and child, life out of death, the mandate to love.

That is what we are about, you and I. The God whose Word is there from the beginning, the God whose Word was with God, and was God, whose Word became flesh in Jesus,

that God conveys truth and beauty and grace through the words of people like you and me—-who put craft, art and discipline and whatever faith we have and love to the mystery of God and God’s love and always amazing grace.

Buechner has a memorable image of that God whose Word is from the beginning.

“God is a poet, searching for the right word. Moses …David …Elijah … John the Baptist …. Word after word, God tries and then finally tries once more to say it right, to get it all into one final word what God is and what human is and why the suffering of love is precious …And the Word that God finds — who could have guessed it? - is this one, Jesus of Nazareth. All of it comes alive at last in this life, Jesus the implausible Jew, the Word made finally flesh in Jesus - flesh.”

Thank you for this high honor. I will treasure it always.